

Student Life and Other Contradictions

Being an investigation into, and a proposal for the total abandonment of, modern educational structures and methods.

Introduction

"Oppression - overwhelming control - is necrophilic; it is nourished by love of death, not life. The banking concept of education [student as empty vessel that teacher deposits knowledge into], which serves the interests of oppression, is also necrophilic ...it transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads men to adjust to the world and inhibits their creative power."

Paulo Freire
Pedagogy of the Oppressed

"...oppression reigns because men are divided not only amongst themselves but within themselves. What separates them from themselves and weakens them is also the false bond that unites them with Power"

Raoul Vaneigem
The Revolution of Everyday Life

LIFE is the continual exploration of the relationship between the individual and the world. Modern institutional schooling has inverted this process. What we now refer to as 'education' is, and has been for a long time, the progressive alienation of the individual from her-self.

Education begins as playful adventure but this is merely a confidence trick: innate creativity and curiosity quickly begin to falter under the increasing weight given to obedient imitation. By the time the child reaches high school education has already become a chore.

Obedience and imitation require nothing original from the child - nothing that originates from her-self. By definition they require the exact opposite: the docile appropriation of others' ideas and behaviour. Taught to compete, conform and obey, the regimented quasi-penal atmosphere of the classroom belies the primary purpose of schooling: submission and indoctrination. Education is how the status stays quo.

This gradual removal of the child from consideration of what is best for them is simply the gradual removal of the child from her-self. Consequently, the child becomes incapable of exploring the relationship between her-self and the world - she loses touch with LIFE. With the exception of those few that already see the

system for what it is, the 'better' the student the more advanced this process of separation; a process that reaches its logical conclusion in the automaton. And so it is that our schools, colleges and universities transform the originally inquisitive and exuberant child into an apathetic, joyless functionary - a component in an economic machine. **Modern education literally sucks the LIFE out of the student.**

1. learning nothing

"The university has become an institutional organization of ignorance."

Situationist International and Strasbourg Uni students, 1966
On the Poverty of Student Life

"Men are born ignorant, not stupid; they are made stupid by education"

Bertrand Russell

Reared on a diet of junk knowledge that becomes even less nutritive as she enters university, the student is mentally weak. Atrophied critical faculties and profound historical naivete leave her disorientated, unable to critique or contextualise the information she is force-fed. An ever-expanding mass of technical information is presented to the student as *serious* knowledge, together with the understanding that academic success is defined as the general acceptance (by academia, not the public naturally) of the student's own esoteric and abstract ruminations. Hence to succeed is primarily to imitate, and to imitate is to further fuel the cancer-like growth of technical knowledge that, being abstract, literally draws the student out of direct connection with her-self and the world. Desire and passion cannot be abstracted because they exist only in the direct connection of the individual with the world. These *unreasonable* things are the essence of life - without them there is NO LIFE. To live without them is to be already dead.

Gullibility and squareness are the hallmarks of the student. Being a poor exponent of reason the student's relationship to rational knowledge is more faith based - the university as *Church of Reason*. Like all faith, this faith does not admit doubt. The student is, therefore, an ardent adherent to a worldview and intellectual method that she is only superficially aware of and skilled in. The naive student dismisses the possibility of engaging with the world in any manner other than that of compulsive and lousy analyst. Consequently she becomes more and

more cut-off from her own desires and passions, without which authentic knowledge and action are impossible. The Chinese say, "to know and not to act is not to know"; therefore it can be reasonably assumed that most students and nearly all academics know *nothing*.

2. expert knowledge

"An expert is someone who knows more and more about less and less until eventually they know everything about nothing."

Anon

The academic is a creature of self-conflict. Clinging vainly to an illusory self-importance (stemming from a time when university was a prep school for the ruling class), they cannot escape the realisation that they now only manage an assembly line. Testament to this is the false modesty with which they carry their meaningless titles. When nearly all 'doctors of philosophy' are philosophically autistic, how can we even pretend to take these hollow honorifics seriously? This is not subtle satire friend, this is slapstick farce! The technician usurped the intellectual a long time ago.

With the continuing proliferation of technical knowledge comes the continuing creation of new academic fields and, of course, new academics to fill them. As the pie gets bigger and bigger, each academic's share becomes proportionally smaller, until none of them seem able to say (or at least agree on) what type of pie they are dealing with, or whether or not there even is a pie. Isolated from other disciplines (and the public) with their own technical languages (jargon), academics run together in gangs dependent on field, and within these fields they run in sub-gangs. Always partisan, the academic somehow remains convinced of his own objectivity. He is an example of false consciousness *par excellence*.

What the academic as technical expert illustrates most clearly is the *fragmentation of knowledge*. Unaware of the need to reassemble these fragments into a coherent whole, the academic instead concentrates his attention on a single splinter, until it eventually becomes the whole world to him. And so the splinters multiply and so the need for their integration grows, and from this situation a tragic irony ensues: The child's natural bent towards this integration - towards a truly philosophical understanding - is stymied in favour of specialisation. When even philosophy succumbs to this reductionist approach - the study that is supposed to link all others - we are left completely adrift: unable to find a base, an anchor, from which we can begin constructing a good 'map of reality'. A "good" map being one that helps us realise a better life.

Viewed as a whole, the authoritative declarations and counter-declarations of the academic body are reminiscent of the *Blind Men and the Elephant*: Collectively absorbed in the analysis of their respective little portions of abstract knowledge, each is certain that *his* is the one that contains the Truth. Yes, academia is a farce - a tragicomic farce. The hilarity implicit in the elevation of the technical and trivial is offset by frustration over such wasted potential. This pretentious technical myopia is piss funny yes, but when is the joke going to end?

3. reasonable desires

"To learn without desire is to unlearn how to desire"

Raoul Vaneigem

A Warning to Students of All Ages

"Gnothi se auton" (know thyself)

Inscription at the Delphic Oracle in Ancient Greece

It is a rare student that knows himself. Academic success - requiring obedience, imitation and abstraction - comes at the price of personal desire and self-knowledge. The student doesn't know what he wants, only what he *thinks* he wants (which is usually based on what he thinks *others* want). How else do you account for why students study what they do? It certainly seems to have less to do with subject matter (who reads a textbook for fun?) than with 'career pragmatism'. And what is career pragmatism but trading immediate enjoyment for the reward of a job (if you're lucky) at some later date, *based* on what you had to force yourself to endure in the first place. Career pragmatism is the logic of the masochist.

Because the student has been alienated from his-self over the course of primary and high school, he makes decisions based not on desire but on reason; and getting a high paying job usually seems the most reasonable thing a student can aim for. You say, in all honesty, that you want to be 'successful', want to be rich, want to have power; but these are the wants of social status and biological imperatives as seen through the lens of reason. Status, celebrity, wealth and sex are desirable alright, but these things are desirable for *all* - they are innate/instinctive drives. Biology, society and reason are a part of us all and, left to themselves, they homogenise and automate us. These static drives reinforce the conception of a *separate* self - distinct, independent and objective. When I feel lustful it is *me* that wants to get off; when I feel like outshining others it of course *me* that will be doing the outshining. Likewise when I want to

deduce the 'truth' or deliberate over which course of action to take it will be *me* doing the thinking.

Authentic desire is not an innate drive, nor does it reinforce the sense of separate self. Instead it arises in those moments when there is *no sense of separate self* - the 'I' recedes and there is only experience of what *is*. This desire is not static for what *is*, is ever changing. Rather than being a property or intention of the individual, authentic desire contains the individual. This is why, when referring to the highest desire, we say "I am in love" - it is not *me* that loves rather it is through losing the sense of *me* that love arises.

Many scientists would dismiss love as merely an emotional state - an epiphenomenon associated with the biological imperative of sex. Many philosophers would hold that love is illusory because we cannot truly know another. In both instances the terminal rationality of these poor folk separates them from the 'immersive' experience that comes through loss of separate self and is the only path to love. This is why ecstasy is such an important drug for the student and academic. Ecstasy melts the ego and immerses the individual in the experience. Ecstasy relieves anxiety (which arises from self-consciousness) and curbs the analytic reflex that distances the individual from the present. Used in moderation, it has undeniable medicinal (as shown by recent use in the treatment of Parkinson's disease) and aesthetic/spiritual potential.

The seamless union, or *interpenetration*, of individual and world is the *self*. The *self* is indivisibly connected with experience and the *present*; in other words, with *reality* (the present is the only reality: the future exists only in our plans, the past only in our memories). *The self is real*; the separate self is a conception - a projected idea. The *self* is that state in which only value is apparent: the *quality* of the experience is the only 'knowledge' and this is *self-knowledge*. The perception of value is prior to any conception (including that of subject and object) and produces a proportionate degree of desire.

This primary apprehension of value can be lost or obscured through the intellectualisation of the experience because trying to understand value with reason is to put the cart before the horse: *reason (truth) is a subspecies of value (good)*. Once the reflective path is taken it is the beginning of the movement away from value and desire, towards rationalisation and confusion.

This intuitive sense of value (the source of so many colloquialisms: 'gut feeling'; 'feel it in my bones' etc), and the desire it causes to spring, are the guides to an authentic and happy life. This presents a challenge for the student because the majority of his education, especially at high school and university, produces a low value apprehension. It is only his

'talent' for rationalisation and self-denial that prevents the student from walking out of class, mocking the teacher as he does so. This dismissal of value is practised so regularly during a young life that the student puts himself in danger of forgetting how to desire altogether. He develops a perpetual inner monologue that makes it hard for him to separate thought from feeling, and so he continues letting others tell him what to do and what to want, mistaking the voice of 'cultural reason' for that of his own desire.

The *self*, no matter how diligently we repress it, is indomitable. From time to time it fights its way up through our rational monologue into consciousness. Sometimes subtle, sometimes visceral, always *immediate* (ie unmediated), it is that sudden feeling or connection that dwarfs the authority of any logical conclusion; though it often seems like the essence of logic itself. It is the song that makes the hair on your neck stand up; the person whose mere presence in the room changes your physiology more poignantly than any drug; the wave of fury that washes over you when you witness injustice. Have you not noticed these moments? - These guideposts to excellence, beauty and happiness. Ignore them at your peril.

Your desire, your *self*, is your connection with the sublime - a spark from the divine fire. It is the source of the highest knowledge or *gnosis* as the Greeks used to say. It is the reason why the consummation of pure desire in the act of sexual intercourse is referred to as 'knowing another' in the Bible. Self-knowledge is prior to rational knowledge and it is the ground from which rational knowledge emerged. Furthermore, rational knowledge is useless, irrelevant, if it doesn't remain grounded in self-knowledge. 'Ungrounded' knowledge is the stuff of scholasticism and trivia; it is the stuff of university.

4. benign violence

"Tat tvam asi" (that thou art)

Hindu saying regarding the relationship of the inner world (mind)
to the outer world (society).

"Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has ever read history,
is man's original virtue."

Oscar Wilde

The student is a masochist but doesn't know it. Unable to be himself because he doesn't know how, he asserts what he thinks is his individuality but is in fact an amalgam of those behaviours and images he is surrounded by. Unquestioning, he swallows and internalizes the dictates of authority, unaware that he

hamstrings his own authenticity. The student's lack of control over his own life; his disconnection from his desires and passions; and his oblivious acceptance of his emasculation as natural, make him a caricature: the supercilious slave. He becomes someone who knows himself only through what others think of him - all form and no content. This was the genius of Bret Easton Ellis in *American Psycho*: to show that 'success' in the Eighties (and nothing has changed) was to sever all connection with the self - to imitate perfectly and consistently until there is no 'you' left, just a shell. The **violence** of this separation - this evisceration - is mirrored in the main character's greed, disgust and, ultimately, his propensity for sadism, murder and mutilation. *Violence begets violence, and violence has many forms.*

It is difficult for us to recognise the violence that has been effected upon us from an early age. Just as the crab doesn't realise what's happening as the water in the pot slowly heats up, so the child's gradual slide away from desire and fun and LIFE is near imperceptible, except when viewed retrospectively as a whole. You have been taught to disregard your own feelings, desires and judgement, letting parents, teachers, police and politicians 'guide' you instead. And guide you to what? The Promised Land of boredom, anxiety, fear, drug addiction, environmental, physical and spiritual decay - woo hooo! Do you really want to be like your parents? Like John Howard? Like every living-dead, suit-wearing fucker whose only pleasure seems to lie in taking you down with them? You are a product of an intrinsically violent society, you are intrinsically violent, and the only way to stop it getting worse is to get off the train now and try a different track - your own track.

5. serious fun

"I have never really been sincere or enthusiastic except when I used to indulge in sports and, in the army, when I used to act in plays that we put on for our own amusement. In both cases there was the rule of a game which was not serious, but which we enjoyed taking as it were."

Albert Camus
The Fall

The economic organization of everyday life is the organization of a living death. Not content with the systematic drudgery that is work and school, remnant areas of autonomous and spontaneous activity are gradually infected with the spirit of seriousness that permeates and sustains the commodity-spectacle.

What was traditionally the bastion of working class camaraderie - sport - is now part of the machinery that long ago crushed it. Sport is now serious business. Just look at all the parents

seriously supporting their kids' weekend sporting endeavours: their vicarious, compensatory competitiveness too often alienating the child from his-self, his parents and the fun of the game.

My uncle used to say that soccer was working man's ballet, and he was right: Sport can be an Art and sometimes still is. But ultra-competitiveness and the spirit of seriousness are antithetical to Art - to the game. They are the stuff of anxiety and stress, not creativity and play.

Any activity can be an Art, but it is *things* that are art. The stuff of passive consumption is 'art' - just another commodity produced for the commodity-spectacle. 'Art' on the other hand isn't a 'thing' at all; it's an *interrelationship* - a symbiotic relationship between the individual and the world. It is that state in which the individual is completely relaxed and focussed and *part* of what they are doing.

The Situationists aimed for the 'realization and suppression of art', by which they meant the realization of Art as LIFE, and the suppression of culture (art) as a centrally organized and/or passively consumed commodity. Their name was derived from their aim: to create open-ended participatory situations - *participation* being paramount. Feeling *part* of an experience, being immersed in it, simply defines those things we like to do. Sex, sport, dancing, motorbike riding, eating - it doesn't matter. The immersion and immediacy; the connection and loss of self-consciousness: this is why we do them. Art is spectacular, Art is participative; art is a thing, Art is an interrelationship; art is serious, **Art is fun.**

Fun is the only revolutionary weapon. Pleasure destroys the hierarchical society that seeks to control (ie destroy) it. Pleasure ignores and ridicules the dogmatic mantras of bureaucratic pseudo-revolutionaries who are preoccupied with the serious business of being boring. Pleasure emanates from within, connecting the individual with his-self, others and the world. Pleasure is the stuff of creativity and spontaneity; it is the enemy of the spirit of seriousness. The rallying cry of the liberated student will simply be: "***if it isn't fun why do it?***"

Ignoring anyone and anything that doesn't satisfy your desires or engage your interest **is** the revolution. All these square socialists, communists and capitalists are really just onanists. Haven't they realised? - **All -isms are wasms.** Refusing the boredom, frustration and alienation implicit in spectacular life is the only revolutionary act anyone need perform. *Joie de vivre!*
- Living as fully as possible is the only point to life.

Conclusion

"Happiness is a new idea"

Paris 68 graffiti

"These past few weeks have witnessed the truth of what the poets have been telling us since the beginning of time: there is no adult world. Youth is reckless, generous, valuable, but the world of wise, mature and organized adults for which youth is supposed to be a preparation does not exist"

Peter Lennon (commenting on the Paris revolt of May 1968)
Paris in the Sixties

The secret to fulfilment, happiness and a better world is...there is no secret. After wrestling with the enormous absurdity and frustration of modern life you eventually say, "Fuck it! This deep thought is depressing me too much; I just want to enjoy myself", and ironically, you solve your dilemma. You rediscover what you already knew as a child - that happiness is your purpose - and realise that, as an adult, **doing what makes you happy is the most revolutionary act imaginable**. Oh, and for those solemn souls who think such selfish anarchic pleasure will destroy the world, haven't you ever noticed that happiness is something that only grows when it is shared?

Someone quite famous - Nietzsche probably - reckoned you had to go through nihilism and come out the other end to understand life. Seems the mad bastard may have been right: rejecting every value, belief and direction that doesn't emanate from within your-self is necessary to 'clear the decks', so the speak. With this reversal of perspective education becomes a matter of using that which resonates with that within you and ignoring the rest. That is, education becomes part of the Art of living - it becomes part of LIFE.

"And what is good, Phaedrus, and what is not good - need we ask anyone to tell us these things?"

Robert Pirsig
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

an end
Gavin Gee-Clough
3.04.2001